Chapter 32
Wearing Another Dress

Damn it, thought Brian. Another dress.

"Before you open your eyes," said a familiar voice. "I have been told it is my duty to remind you that in spite of the name, a hospital gown is not the same thing as a dress." In an audible aside, she added, "What an extraordinary family."

He was aware of stillness, and a clean, chemical smell very much at odds with the sanitation habits of the nineteenth century. His left hand ached, and seemed oddly caught up, but when he reached over to touch it with his right, he found the IV needle, and the tube through which helpful fluids were being provided to his person. The ubiquitous hospital tape confirmed his suspicions, and with a deep breath, he opened his eyes.

"We made it," he whispered. Croaked, really. How long had he been sleeping? Longer, maybe, than he would have liked. Clearly, he was in a hospital room. A modern, twenty-first- century hospital room, complete with electronic monitors and charts and a television (currently muted, but with talking heads on one of the sports channels) bolted to the wall. The real miracle, however, was that Iris was at his bedside, perched in exactly the sort of industrial-upholstered chair typically placed at hospital bedsides.

Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears, but she was smiling through them. "Yes," she said. "We made it."

“It would be worth it to be in a dress, just to wake up with you near,” Brian whispered.

“I’m told you need all those tubes,” she said. “But the medical people assure me you’re being supplied with ample insulin now. You do look better,” she added, obviously relieved. Despite wearing a brand-new pair of jeans and a pullover sweater. Despite her hair being pulled back into a perfectly ordinary ponytail, Iris still maintained the bearing of a lady. Brian would have recognized her in any costume.

His eyes felt sandy, and he worked his dry throat. Guessing what he was after, Iris poured some cool water from a putty-colored plastic pitcher into a putty-colored plastic cup, and added a plastic straw so he could sip. It was heavenly. Brian sipped, swallowed, and when it was empty, set the cup down so that he could hold Iris’ hand. They stared at each other in silence, until Brian jerked upright with a sudden thought.

“Alice! Where’s—”

“Hey,” said Alice from the far corner of the room, which in the manner of modern hospital rooms was narrow rather than wide. She got to her feet and crossed to stand next to the bed. “I’m here. Just didn’t want to interrupt.”

“You made it, too, thank goodness,” Brian said.

“And it seems that either Carl the Castle or the universe in general decided I was an essential part of the package,” said Iris. “I won’t claim that it was a comfortable method of travel, but I am glad to know I am an indispensable part of your world.”

“Still better than that freaking carriage,” Alice muttered. It had the feel of a long-running debate.

“You are,” said Brian ignoring his sister for the moment. “But I was afraid it was some kind of one-to-one exchange and my sister had nobly volunteered to stay behind.”

“Not likely,” Alice laughed.

Absent the glow of the newly besotted, Alice looked exhausted and tear-stained. She wore jeans and a pink hoodie. Brian thought it was strange how quickly he’d become used to the muslin gowns and ribbons of the past. Alice had pulled her hair back in a ponytail, too, but it wasn’t nearly as flattering as the loops and braids and curls she’d been wearing centuries before. Or maybe it was just that she was wiping tears of relief from her reddened eyes.

“We made it,” Alice said. “Who could have guessed that a heartfelt rendition of ‘Can’t Pay the Rent’ was just what Carl needed to take us home?”

“I believe it was you who figured it out, dear,” said Iris. “And you who cajoled your brother into one more performance.”

“Well, Carl seemed to need to ‘see’ the actual items, like the book and the suspenders,” Alice supplied the air quotes. “So it made sense that showing the rent saga, which he already knew, would show him passion,” Alice shrugged. “So much of Brian’s time in the castle was involved with his Demon Theater, it seemed worth a shot at the time.”

Brian's face smoothed out and he struggled for a serious tone. "Well, thank you, Alice, for hanging in there and figuring it all out. It…I…."

Whatever thanks he meant to give, the words were lost as Alice reached out and caught him in a fierce hug. They held one another tightly for a moment, and when they separated, both reached at the same time for the box of tissues at the bedside.

Alice cleared her throat and wiped her eyes. "Take note, Iris, that was the first and last time Brian ever had to be begged to act out."

"I don't mind," said Iris. "I quite like his creative side." She busied herself by with refilling Brian's cup.

Alice suddenly turned on her brother and gave him a playful jab to the shoulder. "And 'oil can' as your final words? All we went through and the best you can leave with is the Wizard of Oz?"

"Well, hey," said Brian in mock innocence. "It's a classic for a reason. And ow. Take it easy."

Alice gave him another hug. "You big nut. You're welcome."

Brian sighed. "So where is Carl? Did he make it here, too?"

Alice lowered her voice and smiled. "Well," she said, as if imparting a great secret. "Not only is Carl a master of time but of space, as well!"

"Huh?" said Brian.

"What Alice means," explained Iris, "is that she has discovered Carl can not only travel through time to bring us here, but when he is sufficiently well-powered, he can

travel to different locations and change his appearance within the same space, too."

"Yes, he's like a chameleon, Brian," said his sister. "He can change the way he looks to suit his surroundings. Right now," she added "Carl is pretending to be a storage shed at Mom's house."

"Huh?" said Brian, again. He wasn't entirely sure he had heard her correctly.

"It seemed like the best place. I mean, we dump stuff over at Mom's all the time," said Alice reasonably. "It's only fair we give her a place to put it. And building permits for suddenly appearing nineteenth century castles are hard to come up with on short notice."

"A storage shed seemed a far more practical solution, at least while we figure things out," Iris explained as if this was the only possible solution to a problem that Brian had not even known existed.

"You were in on this?" Brian asked her. Iris took his hand again, and if that didn't erase the confusion, he definitely liked the hand-holding.

"You know, we had a lot to deal with in a very short amount of time," said Alice. A slight bit of defensiveness creeping into her voice. "Like you."

"And Carl," added Iris.

"We couldn't let Carl stay there and just be the form of a tacky wedding destination venue. And Mom is out of town this week for her conference, and she definitely has the space."

Clearly they had gone over this several times while waiting for Brian to regain consciousness and clearly knew all the arguments.

"You mean, out way back from the garage?" Brian was struggling to catch up, and was trying to find a spot where he could loop into the conversation in a meaningful way.

"Yes, and Carl didn't want to be a castle anymore. He wanted to stay with me," Alice said. "With us," she amended.

Brian frowned in concentration. "How do you know?"

"We have gotten very good at Twenty Questions," Alice said decisively.

"And Mom's backyard?" Brian continued.

"It seemed like a good place to store him." Brian couldn't tell whether Alice was trying to reassure him or herself..

"So Carl the Castle is now Carl the Storage Shed being stored out by the garage at Mom's place," Brian said slowly. "Well, that makes sense," he said, lacking for the moment the ability to suggest any alternative. "I guess." Brian looked over at Iris. "And you're really here?" he said. "I'm not dreaming? Thank god, but I thought that…what? How?"

"After our touching rendition of the Rent saga concluded, I suspect things became quite blurry for you."

Brian shook his head in agreement. "Right."

"For the rest of us, the world seemed to tilt, and even the air began to shimmer. The noise of the house—"

"Carl," said Alice.

Iris nodded and corrected herself. “Carl’s humming grew much more intense.”

“Yes,” continued Alice. “And somehow in the midst of the noise and the spinning, you and I were swept out of the past and into the future, our present.”

“And apparently, my participation in the theatricals must have signified consent. I was included in the general sweeping of those that needed to be swept. So here I am.” Iris looked around regally.

“Here you are,” said Brian. “You look radiant,” he added, still holding her hand.

“And there’s more,” Alice said. “You won’t remember this, but after the Really Big Swoosh, we ended up right in the middle of Cousin Jessica’s wedding cleanup crew. In fact, they stumbled over you while they were sweeping the floors, but I guess the time-travel theme to the wedding was near enough so that nobody looked twice at what we were wearing, they just pulled out their cell phones and dialed 911. Thank goodness,” she added. “You’ve been in the hospital since then. It’s been days. I was freaking out.”

“Days?” asked Brian. He looked over at Iris: “Where have you been staying? Not in the shed, I hope.”

“No,” said Iris, her cheeks glowing pink. “Your sister thought it would be best for me to erm… ‘crash’ at your apartment. After all, even though we have not taken our vows yet, you were here in the hospital.”

“Honestly, I couldn’t leave her on her own in a hotel,” said Alice. “Cell phones and room keys would have been too much to handle right out of the gate.”

“Apparently, clothing and jewelry were allowed on this particular trip, as the jewels I was wearing accompanied me on this journey. I was never one for ostentatious ornamentation, but the pieces I did have were of the first water. Alice has helped me dispose of some of them, so I shall bring along a comfortable dowry, after we are married.” She smiled.

“Uh huh,” said Brian. He was busy gazing into Iris’ eyes to fully track the nuances of her finances. He lifted his head closer to hers.

In answer, Iris leaned down to kiss Brian, and in her corner, Alice silently did a happy dance, presumably to celebrate true love.

Brian broke off the kiss as all this information was sinking in. “So, I just want to get all this straight about Carl. Is he going to be happy being Mom’s storage shed? And, for like, forever?”

Alice briskly rubbed her hands together, as if determined to get to the business of being cheerful and capable instead of worried and anxious. “I haven’t gotten as far as I would’ve liked in my talks with Carl, for obvious reasons but I’ve had time to think, and my best guess is that he was stuck for a lot longer than we were in the past, and….”

“And what?” asked Brian.

“Well, for one thing, I think Carl deserves some time off.”

“And then what?”

“That’s the part we haven’t quite figured out yet.”

“At any rate we've got plenty of time to sort all that out,” said Iris.

Brian couldn’t stop from grinning as he looked at her. He reached out and kissed the palm of her hand. “But who will pay the rent?” he asked.

“I’ll pay the rent,” Iris said, her lips close to his.

“My hero,” said Brian.

They kissed, but this time Brian stayed where he awoke.

However, the lights in the room surged. On the wall, the TV flickered and there was a rumble of thunder in the distance.

“Oh, dear,” said Alice.